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VANNING THROUGH BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK

DON'T LET THE NAME FOOL YOU — THERE'S NOTHING BAD ABOUT THIS NATIONAL PARK!

BY ISAK KVAM



We spent days driving our van through nothing but flat prairies and occasional hills when the horizon disappeared. The sun was setting in western South Dakota, the warm summer breeze blew lazily through tall grass, and suddenly the flat landscape gave way to a huge vista of rugged badland features.

Don't let the name fool you — Badlands National Park is full of jagged canyons, stunning buttes, and colorful sandy formations. And with a handful of great day hikes and a great campground view of the badland features, it's a park for digital nomads.

Badlands National Park was the very first destination my partner Maria and I chose to start our digital nomad lifestyle. We had spent the previous two years shopping for the perfect cargo van, learning how to convert it ourselves, and transitioning our lives to be remote-friendly for a life of freedom and intentionality.

Our time in Badlands was filled with the joys that face every new digital nomad when they first hit the road: an immense feeling of freedom to do what you want when you want and a healthy dose of disbelief that this was actually the lifestyle we got to enjoy after years of planning and working toward it.

It was also filled with less-than-glamorous realities that newbies to the road have to learn: how frustrating it is to find cell service, how to park your rig in high winds so you don't wake with each gust of wind, and of course learning to live with another person in a tiny, tiny space.

Badlands National Park holds a special spot in

our memory since it was the first stop during the honeymoon phase of our vanlife journey — but don't worry, no matter what stage of digital nomad journey you're on, Badlands won't disappoint.

Park visitors can usually look forward to a handful of wildlife sightings — a bison, some prairie dogs, and maybe even a herd of bighorn sheep. We were granted all 3 within five minutes of entering the park.

We first spotted a 2,000-lb. bison grazing in the ditch just past the Pinnacles Entrance Station with its head down, and thankfully uninterested in our big white van, we slowly passed it. Capable of running up to 35 mph, these strong behemoths are an animal you want to keep your distance from.

We drove along Sage Creek Rim Road, which gave way to a gorgeous overlook of the sandy badland features that give the park its name. Pretty quickly we spotted a herd of bighorn sheep posing and resting on the badland features.

A little further down the road, we parked at the Roberts Prairie Dog Town and couldn't help but chuckle at the little prairie dogs poking their heads above their tunnels. Visitors of all ages were smiling at their warning calls to approaching visitors while they bobbed their heads up and down.

Sage Creek Rim Road is a tamer area of the park. There's flat, tall-grass prairie to the north and a great overlook of the badlands wilderness area to the south as the road turns to wash boarded gravel on the way



to the free Sage Creek Campground. We parked here during our stay and were delighted to find another prairie dog town, this one right in the middle circle of the campground itself. Every morning, folks would drink coffee outside their vans, tents, and RVs to watch the prairie dogs bounce up and down.

The iconic park section is the Cedar Pass area, including the year-round Cedar Pass Campground with 96 sites

and a great view of the badlands. The Ben Reifel Visitor Center is nearby, with exhibits on the park's geology and history, a working fossil preparation lab, and a park bookstore to get all the stickers and Badlands merch you need.

Driving the Badlands Loop Road is a "must-do," with its many overlooks of badland formations which make for great photo opportunities. We highly recommend catching a sunrise from Big Badlands Overlook in the east section of the park. The rising sun lights up the red and dark-gray stripes in the sandy badland features in a way the midday sun can never quite compete with.

As for hiking, the Saddle Pass Trail offers a great challenge. The one-hour hike quickly gains in elevation as you climb up the Badlands Wall. Once you get to the top, you can loop through Castle and Medicine Root Trails to weave through flat prairie — you'll enjoy the break before you head back down!

For a shorter hike, take the Notch Trail through a meandering canyon, up a dramatic view up a rope ladder (snap a photo!), and over to a great view of the flat prairie below the badlands. The rope ladder isn't as steep as it's often photographed — but at the top you can point your phone down the ladder top for a more dramatic angle.



With plenty of trails to hike near the campgrounds and some pretty remote backcountry hikes available in the less-accessible areas of the park, Badlands definitely earns a spot on your next trip through the area, whether you're in the honeymoon stage of your journey or not.

Badlands National Park Info

Size: 242,756 acres

Location: Western South Dakota

Best For: Camping, hiking, scenic drives, panoramic views

Where to Stay: Cedar Pass Campground has the best views and is closest to the most iconic views and trails in the park. Sage Creek Campground is more remote and free on a first-come, first-served basis, but the half-hour drive along Sage Creek Rim Road can get wash boarded and muddy, there are fewer badland formations in the area, and there's no cell service. Boondocking at Badlands Overlook in Buffalo Gap National Grassland just five minutes north of the Pinnacles Entrance has great views of badland features and has decent service — the perfect blend for digital nomads. Always check local regulations and follow Leave No Trace guidelines.

Small Adventures: Drive the scenic Badlands Loop Road (1-2 hours). Hike the Notch Trail (1.5 miles, moderate-strenuous). Hike the Door Trail (0.75 miles, easy, boardwalk) and Window Trail (0.25 miles, easy). Visit the Fossil Preparation Lab at Ben Reifel Visitor Center.

Big Adventures: Hike Castle Trail (10 miles, moderate) from the Door and Window parking area, and consider looping it with Medicine Root Loop (4 miles, moderate). Alternatively, start your hike at Saddle Pass (0.25 miles, strenuous) and loop through Castle Trail & Medicine Root Loop. Drive the perimeter South Unit of the Badlands (1-2 hours) or the Sage Creek Rim Road (1-2 hours).

Nearby Points of Interest: The town of Wall, S.D. is 7.5 miles from the park and is home to the famous Wall Drug. The nearby Minuteman Missile National Historic Museum stored nuclear missiles during the Cold War. When you're ready to leave, consider nearby Wind Cave National Park (62 miles away), Custer State Park (69 miles away), Sturgis and Deadwood (87 miles away), and Devils Tower (165 miles away).

About the Author

Isak is an entrepreneur and freelance outdoor writer. He travels full-time through western public lands with his girlfriend Maria in their self-converted van. They left their traditional life in Minnesota to live intentionally and grow their business Seek More Wilderness, which provides outdoor lifestyle apparel that defends the wild. When they're not advocating for public lands, you can find them downhill skiing, housesitting in mountain towns, or scoping out the local coffee shops. Follow them on Instagram [@IsakandMaria](#) and shop the brand [@SeekMoreWilderness](#) at [SeekMoreWilderness.com](#).

